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ABSTRACT

In December 1988 the Illinois State legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act, which sought to replace traditional bureaucratic control of the schools with a complex system of decision making by local schools. The act promotes three distinct sites of power in school communities: (1) parent-dominated local school councils (LSCs); (2) increased principal responsibility and accountability; and (3) increased teacher participation in decision making. Following a description of the reform's background, this paper expands the pluralist bargaining framework to one of "renewed democratic institutions." This perspective maintains that a renewed democratic politics, rooted in sustained local participation, is the necessary antidote to unresponsive societal institutions. This concept of school politics encourages attention to the nature of political discourse in school communities. At the core of strong democratic practice is sustained conversation about shared normative understandings. As yet, however, school communities still need to find ways to interact with outside technical expertise. Finally, Chicago school reform serves a broader community education function. The Chicago experiment holds promise of new knowledge about how democratic participation can be revitalized in major urban centers. (LMI)

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The Chicago Experiment: Enhanced Democratic Participation as a Lever for School Improvement

by Anthony S. Bryk and Yvonna S. Rollow

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Background on Chicago School Reform

In December, 1988 the Illinois state legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act. This legislation, PA 85-1418, emerged out of a lengthy political process involving a coalition of community people working in tandem with advocacy groups and the business community.[1]

Touted as "the most fundamental restructuring since the early part of the twentieth century,"[2] the Act has also been called "radical...a triumph... historic" and "more than educational change. . . In Chicago school reform is a social movement that embraces and reflects the city's diversity."[3]

Chicago's reform, however, is not without its critics. Suspicion still simmers within the city about the "real motivations" behind reform. When parent empowerment and decentralization were first proposed, a number of the city's African-American leaders were skeptical. They argued that parents want good schools for their children, but did not wish to run them nor did they necessarily have the expertise to do so. They feared that this reform was designed to fail in order to achieve the real aim of some politicians and business people: The replacement of the Chicago Public School (CPS) system with a private educational market. It seemed hardly coincidental that radical decentralization swept over the school system just as African-Americans had assumed leadership of the central administration and teachers' union.

Chicago's reform is also under scrutiny on the national scene where critics frequently describe it as anti-professional—a perspective not without some justification, since it strips tenure away from principals and grants teachers only an advisory role. Don Moore, an author of the Act and director of one of the city's school advocacy groups, had specifically argued that "the power of urban school professionals must be curtailed because professional judgment has repeatedly been used as an excuse for practices that are harmful to children."[4] Others see the reform as simply a replay of the 1960's community empowerment movement, which promoted similar improvements, but failed to produce broad systemic change in educational opportunities.[5]

On balance, PA 85-1418 involves a more sophisticated conception of school reform than most of its critics acknowledge. Prior to reform, the highly centralized bureaucracy tended to squelch local initiative, to impair principals', teachers', and parents' efforts at improvement, and to diminish their sense of agency. In response, PA 85-1418 sought to replace traditional bureaucratic control of schools with a complex system of decision-making by local school. The vertical "problem-solution path," where local school officials looked up into the system for guidance, shifted horizontally causing greater engagement of school professionals with their local communities.[6]

More specifically, the Act promotes three distinct sites of power in school communities, each of which now holds potential for initiating a serious challenge to the status quo. First, the Act created opportunities for parents and community members to exercise initiative by giving parent-dominated Local School Councils (LSCs) specific powers "to hire and fire" the school principal, and to approve the budget and School Improvement Plan. Second, principals received more power over their budgets, physical plant and personnel, and were encouraged to use these resources to solve local problems. Whereas in the past principals were expected to follow orders passed down through the system, the job now demands a responsiveness to local clients. Third, the Act gave teachers a voice in principal selection and retention by providing two faculty seats on the LSC, and advisory responsibility over school curriculum and instruction in the Professional Personnel Advisory Committee (PPAC). Chicago reform, thus, sought to encourage greater engagement, not only by parents and community members, but also by principals and teachers.

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Computer skills start in kindergarten

In addition to reorienting the political environment of schools toward greater local participation and responsibility, the reform legislation has several other major provisions. It mandated that state compensatory education funds flow directly to Chicago's schools proportional to their low income membership. This assured that schools with high percentages of disadvantaged students would receive a substantial infusion of funds to support new initiatives. Previously, these funds were used by the District as general aid.

The Act also established greater control by the local school over its personnel and building. Where teachers previously had been assigned by the Board of Education, principals can now recruit and choose new staff. To expedite the removal of incompetent teachers, the remediation process was shortened from 1 year to 45 days. (Only after an unsuccessful remediation process can an incompetent teacher be removed from the classroom.) Principals also have a voice in hiring and evaluating new janitorial and food service personnel by virtue of the Act, and they now have their own building keys. (Prior to reform, principals held keys at the discretion of the school engineer.) Taken together, these new budget, personnel, and plant provisions were intended to assure that schools have adequate resources and authority to advance their initiatives.

Balancing the emphasis on local empowerment are legislative provisions that sought to pull schools toward educational improvement. These consisted of explicit educational goals for children, e.g. 50% of the students in each school will be at national norms by 1994; and an extended set of school objectives, e.g. enhanced teacher professionalism, multicultural curriculum, and greater parent involvement. The Act also mandated strategic planning designed to make local school decision-making more rational. Schools are required to develop three year improvement plans which must be evaluated and updated annually to assure progress toward local goals and legislatively mandated goals. The Chicago school system is required to report annually on each school's progress. If progress is insufficient, a school is subject to a variety of increasingly severe sanctions that may culminate in termination of the principal's contract, removal of the LSC, and placing the school under the receivership of the Board of Education.

In general terms, the legislation attacked the failures of the Chicago school system from two different directions. At the grassroots level, it sought to encourage expanded democratic participation by giving school communities some real authority and resources to solve problems locally. To guide these developments toward valued ends, the legislation added specific goals and objectives, and an accountability and strategic planning process. The aim was to create an overall environment in the CPS that would promote local change.

Moving beyond the formal legislative provisions, PA 85-1418 has also precipitated a substantial expansion of institutional activity focused on improving education. Over the last four years, numerous associations among the city's business and professional leaders have emerged to provide technical and financial assistance to and advocate for individual schools. Education has been a sustained focus of activity among civic groups and community-based organizations (CBOs). The local philanthropic community has committed substantial new funds. Individual faculty members from colleges and universities in the metropolitan area are active in Chicago's schools, and several new research, development, and professional education centers have emerged. In the past, many of these individuals and institutions felt discouraged by their encounters with a seemingly disinterested school bureaucracy.

Four years into reform, it is clear that the CPS system is in the midst of a major organizational restructuring. The central bureaucracy has been substantially weakened, replaced by the greatly expanded democratic activity both in individual school communities and citywide. Neither the Board, nor the central office, nor any other single entity is controlling this change process; rather, power is broadly diffused and extensive conversations about school improvement are sustained throughout the city. Moreover, the content of this conversation is evolving and these changes are influencing policy. Two years ago attention focused almost exclusively on the formation and training of LSCs. Now conversations have shifted to the kinds of additional resources and institutional supports needed by local schools to affect substantive changes in classrooms and instruction.

At present, it is too early to determine whether this legislation will culminate in enhanced student learning.[7] It is clear, however, that Chicago School Reform has catalyzed enterprise in many individual school communities and throughout the city. Whatever the longer term outcomes, there are important lessons here about efforts to decentralize authority, to enhance the capacities of parents and communities to look out for their own interests, and to engage professionals to work toward community goals.

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Traditional Views of School Politics

The vast majority of past studies of educational politics have taken their lead from Peterson who focused on the pluralist bargaining that occurred among interest groups on Chicago's school board.[8] This research, and other related studies at the federal and state level, offers a rather cynical and unflattering picture of educational politics as a "jungle" where individuals and groups compete to advance their particular interests. Marginal changes may be affected, but the basic structure of the system, and especially the power relations within it, remain unchallenged.

More recently, in a study of the interactions between principals and teachers, Ball describes the struggle within British secondary schools over scarce resources—faculty promotions, plum teaching assignments, and instructional materials.[9] Headmasters in these schools deliberately allocated resources to maintain a semblance of harmony and protect the status quo.

We too have observed interest politics in individual Chicago school communities. The School Reform Act opened school doors to their neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, pressing community issues often find parallel expression within the school. In one of our field site communities, for example, gentrification is occurring. The LSC is factionalized between the interests of developers and the affluent residents they are bringing into the neighborhood, and the older CBOs who advocate for the low-income families being forced out. Allocation of discretionary monies in this school has become an arena for political contest. While low-income community groups want to encourage a greater involvement of poor parent and community members by hiring some of these individuals as tutors, the school staff along with some of the newer community residents prefer to use these funds to create additional teaching positions.

Such activities are consistent with accounts of the earlier school decentralization in New York, where the basic elements of "big city" politics—fights over contracts and jobs—was largely transferred from the citywide Board of Education to district-level boards. Although the context shifted, the basic nature of political activity did not.

Unlike New York, the fundamental governance unit in Chicago is the individual school, not a district-level board. As a result, the distance between the site of political activity and its consequences are radically reduced. Individual accountability for political activity is now more sharply drawn.

The introduction of parents and community members into local school politics also appears to have changed the nature of this activity—at least in some schools. As Ball notes, most educational decision-making is dominated by professionals and involves a deliberate attempt to depoliticize local problems. Public choices about common affairs are viewed as technical issues requiring experts and other managers to solve. This professionalization of the public realm displaces more fundamental discussions among citizens about their schools including the "opportunity to debate the definition of the school."[10] In contrast, in those Chicago schools where parents are actively involved, we have seen LSC members press a more personal perspective about what "our school" must do to meet the needs of "our children."

A Politics of Enabling School Communities [11]

The full breadth of the political activity occurring in Chicago's schools is not adequately captured by a conception of school politics which reduces all activities to a competition among individuals and groups over scarce resources. In expanding on this pluralist bargaining framework, we have turned to writings about renewed democratic institutions.[12] These authors maintain that a renewed democratic politics, rooted in sustained local participation, is the necessary antidote to unresponsive societal institutions. They remind us of the importance of public discussion about common affairs, of the educational opportunities inherent in such conversations, and how over the long term, this activity can help institutions become more self-guided. Chicago's efforts at local empowerment hold potential for enabling school communities to create an alternative vision of education for their children.

This concept of school politics encourages us to attend to the nature of political discourse in school communities. Who is involved, what concepts appear salient and how are they being advanced? Do parents and community members bring forth new interests that challenge existing ones? Now that individual principals and teachers are freer to express views distinct from the central office, what issues do they introduce? Of key concern is whether the definition of the school—its mission, goals, and understandings about 'how things get done around here'—is subject to challenge.

The spirit of the reform legislation and the broader discussions about schooling that are occurring across the city play an important role in this regard. This rhetoric challenges each school community to create an institution that is sensitive to the needs of its specific population, one where "all children" will succeed and no child will fail. If taken seriously at a local school, these ideas can act as a powerful counterforce to a politics of private interests. In such a school, the efforts of the LSC parent seeking to improve educational opportunities for his or her own child can evolve into advancing the welfare of all children. Similarly, efforts by teachers to improve their work conditions can press for a re-examination of school operations to better serve students' needs.

Bake sale at the Parent Center

Places where such activity is occurring are marked by sustained debate over the key ideas that vie for moral authority and their role in specific school improvement plans. To be sure, individuals disagree and conflicts can be intense. But these debates are about matters of broad concern, rather than narrow personal gains, and different perspective can often be transformed into common interests. This is quite different from pluralist bargaining, which at its best produces a compromise among fixed interests, and at its worst creates winners and losers. In contrast, when a politics of enabling school communities is successfully engaged, the base of shared understandings grows, positive sentiments and trust among participants rise, and the capacity of the school community to tackle even larger problems expands. Over time, a detailed scrutiny of existing organizational practices becomes likely.

On balance, the road to an effective local politics is neither easy nor assured and it is not without its own distinctive problems. Parochialism, intolerance toward strangers, and maintaining an openness to new ideas are potential pitfalls of localism. Moreover, many Chicago school communities suffer from high student and family mobility, a history of hostility between parents and school professionals, and a neighborhood context plagued by poverty, violence, and an overriding concern for personal safety and survival. When combined with a cynical view that politics means "taking care of your own," these are not favorable conditions for the development of a politics of enabling school communities. Ironically, while broad participation expands the social resources in a school community, the emergence and growth of such participation depends on these very same resources.

These concerns notwithstanding, the idea of school communities as sites of strong democratic practice remains appealing. This seems especially so when we acknowledge that the aim of political activity—school improvement—is not a quick fix. Rather, school change necessitates the development of trusting personal relationships among parents, teachers, and principal, and requires that these relationships be sustained if school staff are to take risks, work together, and stay committed for the long haul. That is, this systemic change process demands a strong democratic practice.

An Important Role for Normative Understandings

At the core of strong democratic practice is sustained conversation. Chicago's school reform substantially expanded the scope of this activity in individual schools. Many basic school practices (e.g. should students march between classroom in orderly lines or be required to wear uniforms?) which were simply taken for granted in the past or decided by administrative fiat are now subject to debate among parents, community members, teachers and the principal. Each participant brings to these discussions his or her own personal views, or normative understandings about what is "good," "proper," and "right" for their school. Different normative ideas built up out of past family, school, and work experiences are now transported into these deliberations and can become sources of conflict among those now responsible for their school. These disagreements can be particularly sharp in some schools because of the highly varied backgrounds among the participants.

Included here are assumptions about: What is a good school (e.g. a place that has the programs and resources of a suburban school versus one that may need to be structured differently to meet the needs of particular students and families); about what children should learn (e.g. specific knowledge and skills to be acquired versus a view of students as active learners); about how children and parents should be treated, and how, in turn, children and parents should treat teachers. In addition, since politics is the lever for school change in Chicago, understandings about the nature and purposes of civic and polit-

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ical participation, also come into play.

Although rooted in personal background and experience, normative understandings are not static. Rather they can be reshaped through social interaction in settings where different expectations and ideas prevail. The LSC holds potential as a context for such human development, to cultivate the skills of citizenship, enrich their personal competence. Here, parents, teachers, and principal can learn about each other, and in the course of work they must do together, forge a common interest. Through such interactions, basic understandings about roles, authority and domains of practice can be recast and the institution itself renormed.

Ultimately, if such activity is maintained for a period of time, a more unitary form of politics may emerge, when matters of importance are regularly discussed, and conflict is less threatening because there are avenues for resolution when it does occur.[13] The institution benefits from a substantial social resource formed out of both a set of principles held in common and the trusting face-to-face relationships built up within the small confines of a single school community.

The Interaction with Technical Knowledge and Expertise

Currently, Chicago is awash with "Christmas tree" schools where large amounts of discretionary money have combined with private gifts to add new programs and more equipment, a bit like hanging dazzling ornaments on a tree. Unfortunately, the tree itself and its basic needs have gone unattended.* Awareness of this problem, however, is growing across the city and a new wisdom is emerging that the core of schooling—teachers' knowledge and classroom practices—must be substantially improved.

This development, however, points to a major unresolved issue: How can technical expertise be drawn into enhanced local politics? Schools are relatively complex entities where efficiency is highly valued. Past experiences with most educational innovations leaves us less than sanguine about how well most schools fare when developing their own strategic plans. While some may do fine on their own, many need to engage sustained outside assistance if the end result of the participation in schools is improving student learning.

How these new relationships are to be forged remains unclear. Instructional guidance in the form of top-down mandates from the central office were rarely effective in the past and seem highly inappropriate now. Similarly, the experiences of the last three years where schools have had increased freedom to purchase their own goods and services are not very encouraging (although some individual schools are notable exceptions).[14] In short, neither the command authority of a school bureaucracy nor the contractual relationship of the marketplace seems particularly well-suited for this purpose.

Interestingly, the new literature on enhanced democratic participation is largely silent on the question of how local political practice might engage effectively with outside expertise. In our view, new cooperative relationships between local schools and outside assistance appear necessary. Neither the external expert as supervisor nor as service provider will suffice. Rather, these individuals must become engaged in some fashion as participant-stakeholders in the political practice of a school community. The lessons gleaned here from Chicago's experiences should be of broad interest as they touch on larger, enduring concerns about the proper role of technical expertise in a democratic society.

Opportunities for Community Education

Finally, by expanding participation as it does, and enlarging the terrain of school politics, Chicago School Reform serves a broader community education function. These opportunities may be particularly important in urban contexts where many parents and community members are undereducated and disenfranchised, and where school professionals have also had few occasions in the past to exercise initiative. Through participation in LSCs and other school-based activities, individuals can develop public skills of citizenship, leadership and political discourse that are essential to a democratic life. This idea resonates with recent calls for renewal of our democratic institutions such as Lindblom's discussion of a need for a more self-guided society, Barber's considerations of the features of a strong democracy, Bowles and Gintis's analysis of the link between adult learning and political practice, and Evan and Boyte's notion of the educative function of "free spaces."

The emergence of "truly disadvantaged" urban communities in recent times, however, raises new questions about their ability to engage and sustain the kind of participation envisioned here, and to use the opportunities it affords for broader community education.[15] To date, much of the research on citizen participation has focused on middle class and largely homogeneous communities.[16] While there is a literature on low income neighborhoods, it is largely concerned with Great Society programs at a time when resources were relatively ample (or at least expanding) and the communities themselves were more advantaged relative to today's conditions.[17] The Chicago experiment holds promise of new knowledge about how democratic participation can be revitalized in our major urban centers.

* Especially popular are computer systems that are now sold directly to schools and promise to help children on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, but deliver computerized drill sheets that directly mimic the tests. In fact, under decentralization, local schools have become a new market for an expanding network of entrepreneurs.

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